

ARTICLE

The Political Economy of Donor Aid in Northern Ghana

Gloria Kafui Bob-Milliar¹ | Imhotep Paul Alagidede²

¹University of the Witwatersrand, Wits Business School, Parktown, South Africa; University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana gkmilliar@gmail.com

²University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; Simon Diedong Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies, Wa, Ghana; Nile Valley Multiversity, Techiman, Ghana

Abstract

Economic development in the northern regions of Ghana has lagged the southern and coastal areas of the country. Over the past four decades, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies have moved in large numbers to provide key social and economic intervention in areas that have been neglected by traditional central and local government support. This is largely to improve livelihoods and complement the meagre public efforts in the economic development of the north. Despite the huge inflow of donor funds towards reducing poverty and inequality, northern Ghana remains very impoverished. This research presents a political economy view of donor aid and its heterogeneity within a narrow target area of the savannah regions of Ghana. The study draws on survey data from former NGO workers, development experts and community members, and it is supported with archival data and anecdotal evidence. The paper posits that the culture of dependency on donor aid is very much evident in the lives of the beneficiary communities due to existing vulnerabilities. The idea of help for the helpless as advanced by 'development aid implementors', work assiduously to sustain their own survival with less accountability and proper evaluation of project aims versus outcomes. We argue that the usual basket case of the north seen as a needy region should be discarded in favour of a more appropriate organically evolved approach of pulling the savannah regions up by their own bootstraps. Complemented by external flows, this dynamic approach could yield a higher utility and a well-planned revival of northern Ghana.

KEYWORDS:

Aid implementors; Beneficiary communities; Donors; NGOs; Northern Ghana; Political economy.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s sub-Saharan African countries have been democratising their political systems with support and approval from many international non-governmental Organisations (NGOs). Many states that have made the transitional hope to increase their countries visibility and promote economic growth and development. Yet, donor funding for development in African countries are continuously changing and dwindling (Swiss & Brown, 2015). The consequence of this change is that the donor aid dynamics are adjusting to new interests, as some traditional development partners are exiting to other strategically important countries, most often within Africa (Gulrajani & Swiss, 2019; Kumi, 2019; Swiss, 2017).

The growth path of Ghana towards the lower middle-income status was a profound achievement, however, a closer look depicts the affirmation that poverty reduction and inequality is very much regionalised in character, leading to increasing levels of deprivation, across and within the 16 administrative regions (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015; Clementi, Molini, & Schettino,

2018). The governmental strategic document dubbed ‘Ghana Beyond Aid’ (GbA) is intended to reduce the development gap as a national agenda, rather than a sole government policy. The policy aims at helping Ghanaians focus on values and mindset shifts; as it is equally believed to condition the environment for pursuing development for increased welfare. The difference would be not just implementing donor sponsored interest or supervising a list of projects. But ironically implementing donor partnered projects towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Asante, 2020; Kumi, 2020).

According to Whitfield & Jones (2007), ‘there is very little motivation for a government that span a period of four years to pursue policies or projects that cannot attract aid, but a rather strong incentive to go along with what donors want as long as it can deliver something’ (Whitfield & Jones, 2007). The proposed strategy however makes the call for Ghana Beyond Aid to be informed partially by arguments that, although donor aid has played a substantial role in Ghana’s growth path, the nation desires more than ‘just aid’ (Aklorbortu, 2019; Kumi, 2020). Among others, the purpose of this aid charter has driven mixed public reaction and expectations from both civil society organisations and the donor countries (Aklorbortu, 2019; Ananpansah, 2019).

Although the northern regions of Ghana are as endowed as the coastal regions in terms of natural and human resources, the colonial hangover of lop-sided development and years of neglect by successive post-independence national governments has reduced the territory to mere recipients of handouts. There are heightened fears and speculation that the total withdrawal of aid could spell doom for an already vulnerable regions (Kwao & Amoak, 2022) towards the achievement of the expected level of infrastructural transformation to boost economic growth. At the same time, critical examination of the funds that have flowed into the savannah regions have delivered mixed verdicts.

On the one hand some improvements can be observed in the provision of portable water to some of the most arid regions that did not have adequate supply of the vital resource. Various community projects, ranging from support for rural farmers to improve farming practices, the introduction of new technologies in the agricultural value chain and agribusinesses with shea processing has brought some meagre improvements in the livelihoods of many beneficiary communities. Donor support for vulnerable groups such as children, the girl-child, and women has been fostered by the plethora of interventions that went into the northern Ghana experiments. However, an unprejudiced analysis indicate that the volumes of donor funds committed to the projects, versus the actual works delivered cannot be justified on any of the standard measures of project evaluation.

A critical analysis of the cost-benefit scenarios of the flow of funds and matching projects is beyond the scope of this article’. However, an examination of the political economy thinking around the role of donor aid could provide a better background. The perceptions surrounding ‘the giving and receiving of aid’ would further give a critical examination of the more quantitative assessment of the value for money approach to project evaluation. Consequently, this initiated our examination of the political economy of donor aid at the micro level within the five northern regions of Ghana. Given the concentration of donor aid through NGOs’ projects and programmes, such an exercise affords us a closer understanding of the dynamics of aid, particularly when one considers the motivations for donors to dole out money for projects in deprived regions, its implementation prospects, and the challenges at the grassroot level.

2 | THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

Even though terrestrial influence justify for a great deal of the inequalities that exist between the southern and northern part of Ghana, poverty and infrastructural disparity reinforces it. Poverty is predominantly prevalent in two major sectors of the economy that underpin the divide, agriculture being one, form about 60%, and with the informal sector being the second constituting about 70% of the population. Both sectors are concentrated in rural Ghana. With 46% of informal food crop farmers characterised as poor in 2013/2014, this group are into subsistence farming and informal commercial activities such as petty trading of crafts, pottery, and farm produce.

Constituting the worst in terms of economic welfare and social deprivation, they are the inhabitants primarily confined to the five northern regions of Ghana (Jackson et al., 2019; Victor, 2015). The topographical vegetation of northern Ghana for the sake of emphasis, is covered by the Sahel savannah to the north-eastern borders of Ivory Coast (the Upper West and Savannah regions), and the grassland savannah to the north-western borders of Burkina Faso and Togo (Upper East, North East and the Northern regions) (Abdulai, 2017; Plange, 1979). The majority of the five northern regions are predominately rural and it is constituted by male-dominated-subsistence farmlands.

Due to the mounting levels of economic and social disparities, Ghana’s spatial underdevelopment has engineered a further demarcation of its 10 regions to 16 in furtherance to bridging the gap. Development experts have contended that the vastness of northern Ghana makes its infrastructure and economic development slow and daunting. The demarcation exercise afforded

the previous three regions to be split into five independent regions to make development penetration easy, while improving the flow and distribution of state resources. The five regions in the north of Ghana are typically bucolic, characterised by one short rainy season, followed by a prolong period of dry weather influence by the dry harmattan wind from the Sahara Desert (Bob-Milliar, 2019). Farming is principally restricted to the brief rainy period with erratic-storms, while in the dry season, growers nurture lands around irrigation dams and dug-outs for subsistence. Most of the poverty cases in Ghana are concentrated in these savannah related regions of the country, with its pervasiveness being comparatively high within the communities (Bawakyillenuo & Kpieta, 2013).

While the whole of the (Gold Coast) Ghana was described as an agricultural territory during the pre-colonial period, some southern parts held important natural resources. They included gold, manganese, diamond, and bauxite, in commercial quantities, with a minor incidence of other minerals. But the colonial administration still labelled the country as lacking the minerals (or suitable alternatives) necessary for the development of heavy industries for the Crown (Killingray, 1982; Shaffe, 2017). A report titled *Confidential Despatch to the Secretary of State of the colonies* indicated that ‘there may be small quantities of oil and minerals, but investigations have not yet shown that it is present in quantities sufficient to justify working it... However, the realistic view was probably to discount its presence as a factor of production’¹. The document captioned it as ‘the prospects and possibilities’ that were investigated. The dossier concluded that, there is no prospect that the Gold Coast will become primarily an industrial country in the foreseeable future². It further contended that the practical and the most profitable approach to industrial development was likely to be in the line of processing agricultural products from the Gold Coast and its Northern territories. Even though this was the development prospects thought of for the colony, the administrators were still hesitant.

A second commissioned account discouraged the agricultural prospects detailing that ‘any policy of development that involved technical changes in the existing methods of agricultural production must take account of some factors such as “hydrographic and climatic possibilities”’. For the Northern Territories, it showed that “soil conservation” must be taken seriously. In addition, subsistence farming should be “zealously guarded” as a form of livelihood based on its sparse population as opposed to mechanisation³. Comparing state sponsored mechanisation within the colony, and the Northern Territories for the Crown’s benefits industrial development fell largely into two categories: one that related to the processing of agricultural products from the Northern Territories, and the other to the mineral wealth of southern Ghana. The concepts of the northern protectorate’s administration at a lower cost were of concern, and this was further heightened with the need to increase the labour force for the mines, the cocoa plantations, and the West Africa Frontier Force (Kambala, 2023; Thomas, 1973).

A consensus was nonetheless reached in a separate report and arranged in another correspondence that a team of technical consultants should give detailed advice on the development of the Volta River system which span both the north and south of Ghana. It was the technical advisory committee that recommended that ‘the partial development of the river transport for the conveyance of bauxite outweighs the development of the irrigation system and its associated socio-economic problems of industrialisation of the Northern Territories.’⁴ It stated that the problem of urbanisation associated with industrialisation could repopulate the Northern Territories and reduce the migration to the forest regions of Ashanti. However, that could not “jolt immediate benefit for the proposed investment for the Crown” but the minerals (gold and bauxite) wealth could.⁵

This led to the polarisation in development between northern and southern Ghana. The labour policy mandate for the protectorates included the cautious thwarting of the educational systems introduced in the southern part. More importantly, it further directed the neglect of educational infrastructure and other social amenities in the north anchored on the de facto forced labour migration from the region (Bening, 1990; Grischow, 2006).

From the 1940s, the colonial administration shifted its attention towards food production from the north to cater for the needs of the growing urbanisation in the south. Even though the comparative advantage of the Northern Territories in the production of cotton, tobacco, shea nuts, tomatoes, cereals, groundnuts, and livestock were documented and presented in various reports, a concerted effort was not made for its growth and expansion (Chalfin 2004; Nyaaba & Bob-Milliar, 2019). Instead, the colonial administration created measures to incorporate the northern protectorate into their colony, and its policy for the region could be best summed up as that of total neglect for its infrastructure development. The deliberate policy ploy for the exploitation of its population, the known deficiency in its soil fertility, coupled with the planned isolation and disregard of its social amenities, neglect of the natural and workable resources, and lack of exploration of the economic potential marked the gross differences

¹Public Record and Archive Administration Department (PRAAD), Tamale, NRG/8/1/48.

²PRAAD-Tamale, NRG8/1/48.

³PRAAD-Tamale, NRG8/1/48.

⁴PRAAD-Tamale, NRG15/1/35.

⁵PRAAD-Tamale, NRG8/1/48.

in growth in the north of Ghana. The northern regions' inclusion in the development of the country was heralded with hand full of projects introduced as a sign of interest in the region (Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Nyaaba & Bob-Milliar, 2019).

The natural gap nurtured by the colonial administration to further its divide and rule tactics; prompted Kwame Nkrumah to bridge the development gap technologically, economically, and socially through concerted developmental efforts and policies (Brukum, 1998). The Convention Peoples' Party (CPP) ushered in the eminent all-in-one import-substitution policy. This was characterised by a sweeping capital investment towards the development of education, infrastructure, and agriculture, heralding the industrialisation drive particularly in northern Ghana (Biney, 2008; Brukum, 1998).

Even though this was done to fast-track the growth of the northern regions, Ghana's internal politics coupled with the geopolitics of the time did not permit its sustainability and progress. The explosion of policy changes, stemming from modernisation through to the transformational styles of the military regimes of the 1970s and 80s cascaded the growth and development indices. Some of these regimes saw programmes like Operation Feed Yourself and Industry scaling up agriculture production to commercial tonnage in the northern regions (Girdner, Olorunsola, Froning, & Hansen, 1980; Mensah, Bawole, & Ahenkan, 2017). Others like the redistribution and growth dynamics, accentuated by the structural adjustment and liberalisation phase, also deflate the government-backed welfare policies, and battered some gains made (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015; Harrigan & Mosley, 1991).

By the 1980s, the economic conditions between the north and the south suffered further set back with the introduction of the Fund-Bank neoliberal right-wing policies of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The sponsored agenda; among others advocated the devaluation of the national currency and the elimination of state subsidies to reduce government expenditure for fiscal prudence. It also involved the removal of state intervention in economic production, leaving the engine of growth to be driven by the policies of trade liberalisation (Kraus, 1991; Mills, 1989).

Although it was envisaged that the tailored reforms would not collapse the developing economies, the aftereffect of adjustment and its enhanced correlates left a deeper scar and an irreparable mutilation on Ghana's socio-economic development. This was evidently seen in a weakened state authority, subdued productive capacity and negotiation, and a yawning gulf of various colourations. The structure of employers and employee's relationship became corrupted, while public and private capital accumulation lines blurred. Rural-urban development plans subdued as migration drift ensued, male and female connectivity disoriented and most importantly, the development gap between north and the south. Structural adjustment can be objectively argued to have solidified the divide and rule logic of the western nations and consigned many developing economies to be perpetually dependent on the advanced economies.

For an already vulnerable region, the focus for growth on export commodities widened the gap when cocoa, timber, and rubber plantations in southern Ghana performed better than the northern regions which were now developing shea nut, tobacco, and cotton. Even though these crops were developed as export commodities to complement their southern counterparts, they still depended heavily on government in terms of subsidies for seedlings, agrochemicals, storage, and marketing.

The SAPs advocated currency devaluation as a conduit to export promotion. Standard economic models suggests that cheaper exports should increase their demand in external markets and enable export nations to sell more through increased demand. However, giving the high elasticity of demand for primary products in world markets, such a policy is counterproductive when the terms of trade constantly shift against developing countries. More especially in environments where primary products are dependent on rain-fed agriculture and there is no value addition, price negotiation are perversely alluded too for cheap manufactured imports. The underdevelopment of Ghana's export commodities and international trade liberalisation meant an influx of cheap imports, and Ghanaian produce from the north could not compete favourably on the global stage.

The withdrawal of government subsidies equally limited financial support and access to basic public services such as health, education, clean water, and sanitation. However, for northern Ghana, the situation was more precarious as the region had already limited access to health, education, and sanitation facilities. These made most inhabitants resort to non-orthodox health treatment in place of health facilities. The evidence was in the high infant mortality of about (239/1000) death per births, and in areas where delivery was not performed by trained personnel, rates recorded were higher within the five northern regions (Bawah, Akweongo, Simmons, & Phillips, 1999; Binka, Maude, Gyapong, Ross, & Smith, 1995). According to Bawah et al., (1999) strong socio-economic risk factors such as poor water quality and sanitation, and no electricity in some cases led to a substantial increase in mother and child mortality rates. These in effect affected the quality of life and the general drop in the regions' standard of living (Binka et al., 2007; Binka et al., 1995; Songsore & Denkabe, 1995).

A combination of these negative fallouts (from internal austerity measures, the global financial crisis, access to, and preference for cheap foreign foods, clothing, and cultures) entrenched the north-south divide in Ghana in terms of poverty and inequality. For instance, the five northern regions averagely had the highest level of poverty and the largest increase in inter-regional inequality

since the 1990s according to Cooke, Hague, & McKay (2016). They suggested that while Ghana's inclusive growth path had motivated an impressive poverty reduction figure, the rising in-country inequality had undeniably not reduced poverty. Since 1992, the rise in household inequality of 1.1% had further sunk 289,822 people into poverty. This figure rose to 555,422 people between 1992-2006 representing 2.5% of in-country inequality (Adu, Alagidede, Osei, & Asamoah, 2023; Cooke et al., 2016).

The five northern regions became more deserted following the drought that hit the country between 1981 and 1983, combined with the periodic wildfires, and poor agricultural productivity. Poverty became endemic in these regions and the locals resorted to migration, thus precipitating the need for global attention and donor interventions.

3 | POVERTY INTERVENTIONS AND DONOR DYNAMICS

The global empathy for the poor nation state by the rich in promoting social peace and justice intensified the distinctive humanitarian benefit of reducing global poverty. This promoted the collaboration and complementarities among public private partnership on both the local and international front in managing the emerging humanitarian crisis. For the past half century, the work of donors has however reinforced the structures of society whilst compensating for disparity in wealth and power among the social ranks of participants in aid. The plight of Northern Ghana caught the attention of both the local and international donors in the early years of the 1990s. The immediate pull factor to the region was the ethnic dispute over farmland and settlement. Between 1980 and 2000, there were over 20 recorded inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflict over key economic resources such as farmlands, settlement, and water bodies engineered in part by chieftaincy contestations (Brukum, 2000; Lund, 2003). The cost of these conflict in terms of human lives lost and injuries, unwarranted destructions of state and private properties, the social and humanitarian costs of relocation and resettlement were having debilitating effect on the state's resources. The price of peace at the expense of the regions' socio-economic infrastructure development was staggering. These events focused the global light of the millennium development goals on the region.

The initial humanitarian catastrophe led to several international governmental and non-governmental agency partnerships, as the region became the most susceptible to disease, hunger, wildfires, and drought. These nonetheless culminated in donor's fight against poverty and deprivation through the activities of NGOs. Food aid, grants, and voluntary development experts seized the opportunity to support the needy and help resolve the problem of poverty and underdevelopment in the savannah regions. They even at a point formed the coalition of NGOs for conflict resolution and peace building to help resolve the immediate humanitarian crisis (Arhin, 2016; Brukum, 2000; Tsikata & Seini, 2004).

The provision by donors for poverty alleviation and financing social development among poorer and emerging economies began to assume many purposes and responses at the turn of the century. Notable in the case of northern Ghana are donor aid dynamics for poverty alleviation programmes based on the 'interventionist economic distributive paradigms and community participation'. This was often the recommendation by most of the participating donor partners in the region.

The first of this kind of multi-lateral development strategy after the failure of some piecemeal bilateral pilot projects was the integrated rural development solely for the region. It was captioned the Upper Regional Agricultural Development Project (URADEP) (Abudu & Ascroft, 1978; Hesselberg & Yaro, 2006). This was a multi-lateral project with the sponsorship of the World Bank, the UK, and the Netherlands. The government of Ghana gave its sovereign land space while funding and technical ability were from the afore mentioned partners. The philosophy of the project was debunking the piecemeal growth the region has seen and bringing in an integrated all-inclusive development. Its composition included sectorial incorporation with the focus being reducing poverty. The mission was to increase agricultural productivity, but its impact had more challenges than successes (Aryeetey, 1990).

Quite fundamental in the failures of this development project was the absence of a proper local policy framework and content, and the enabling physical infrastructure. Even though the government of Ghana granted its land space and some of its official human resource personnel, the lack of policy-making processes and the external power structure were quite conflicting than complementing. The socio-cultural factors of the beneficiaries were equally at play with the operational dynamics of the donors and their technical ability. This meant by the time of the project expiration, phases of the project were either incomplete or handing over was not sustainable by the local government. Individual private ability was built, which also meant the loss of institutional memory.

Even though Aryeetey (1990) blamed the national political and local power structures at the time, the sole disconnect was the absence of national and local policy structure and framework to follow. The project was likewise limited to selected communities in the Upper East and West Regions, but the impression was given as if it was for the whole savannah regions. As Hesselberg

and Yaro (2006) blamed the futility of the donor funds on the absence of local content, capacity building and integration, their prediction on the project communication was precise. It was the creation of the URADEP radio which educated the various communities on best farm practices and places to seek help (Agunga, 2012), that kept the farmers motivated. Information dissemination among participating beneficiary communities in the URADEP project was the success.

In quick succession to the URADEP was the Northern Region Rural Integration Project (NORRIP), another large scale, but bilateral aid project implemented in northern Ghana. This was a partnership between the Canadian government represented by their development agency, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the Government of Ghana (Botchway, 2001; Mohan, 2002). It gradually developed a “creative bottom-up” approach in its implementation design as opposed to the top-bottom approach of URADEP. This was because the first Canadian development agenda of creating access to water began in some communities in the Upper East region within the same period as URADEP. The Upper East region was more helpless to access water than the northern region which later became the project headquarters.

The decision to expand to the Northern region was for recognition at the expense of concentration of donor effort to resolve a problem. This was because the northern region had much more water resources to tap from, and secondly the Catholic Mission through a multi donor efforts of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) had a more sustainable water management systems in many of these beneficiary communities. NORRIP was good enough to extend the notion of sustainability to include effective community participation in the provision of boreholes, hand dug wells, and pit latrines for the communities involved (Abudu & Ascroft, 1978; Agunga, 2012). However, its challenges remain unmanageable. This was because the areas of participation in the donor projects were often isolated from the national policy agenda, and funders of these projects often dictated the pace and nature of the regions development. The expertise and development planning often mirrored that of the foreign or donor country, while the beneficiaries were often involved in multiple projects at the same time.

Another particular concern of the community was that their socio-cultural ethics were ignored when for instance pit latrines were dug and built for them (see Abudu & Ascroft, 1978). The coexistence of different ethnic groups does not easily translate into same traditional and ethical norms of cohabitation, as was the case for the donor country. This is because the communities often follow through their unique ethnic ritual and socialisation. This is often the case when donor aid has a sole aim on one hand and on the other hand, the beneficiary communities had expectations that do not meet the goals of the financiers

Donors through the aid implementers often create, control, influence and perform acts of “local-ness” in collaboration with the beneficiary communities to claim authenticity in their quest for sustainable development (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Forbes, 1999). For this reason, the beneficiary communities equally and ultimately display different act of indigenouness through different functional associations to multiple donors at different times.

4 | DONOR INVOLVEMENT AND BENEFICIARY RESPONSE

Resources of most Non-Governmental and non-profit organisations are said to be multifaceted and dynamic in both responsibility and accountability. They tend to vary across space, time and field of activities and are often conditioned by the local economic and market structures. Most unvaryingly, they are rewarded by (political) activities carried out informally in households and local communities. The extent and nature of government-non-profit relations are perhaps the clearest and most concrete in the mix of auspices. Under this patronage, a wide range of common goods and services are delivered in communities according to Smith & Grønberg (2006).

So, where the bulk of government services are delivered through partnership directly or indirectly by local NGOs or international ‘governmental development agencies’, the relationship is likely to become one of competition. Usually between the “in-state” government and the non-profit institution delivering the service (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Smith & Grønberg, 2006).

More importantly, in situations where individuals patronise services directly from the non-profit space with or without the local government involvement, the state may foster direct competition. This is usually among the non-profit non-governmental and other commercial entities within the same space. In this case, responsibility, accountability, and ownership is lost both economically and politically (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Krause, 2014). This implies that the mix of delivery systems through which governments supported services are carried out varies among nation state and across policy field particularly in developing countries (Elliott & Salamon, 2002; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016).

Moreover, there is considerable evidence to show that the tools of government actions in fortifying NGOs activities in aid receiving countries has been diversifie in recent years. Both the United States as the largest global donor, and the world at

large, are mounting different ideological pressures on many third sector players (Salamon, 2005) particularly in many developing countries. In the same vein the extent and opportunity of funding operation of NGOs activities are dependent on these international funders (Kwao & Amoak, 2022).

In most developing countries where there is the absence of a well-structured framework for developing a community, the third sector assumes a developmental role to help communities assert themselves, and for basic service delivery from the central government. The increasing delivery of publicly funded programmes (by donors) through the non-profit and non-governmental organisations (implementors) space, often obscure relationships of accountability. This further distort citizens (beneficiary communities') understandings of how tax revenues are spent by their governments. It nonetheless allows beneficiaries to believe that donor funds are 'windfalls' and requires less accountability as it promotes 'humanitarianism'. This likewise allows governments (both host and donor) to displace the risks of rationalising development and policy. They invariably shift the 'responsibilities and ownership' onto nongovernmental entities who then assume a patriarchal role in the development puzzle (Pierson, 1994; Stahl, 2019). This is very much the case in Northern Ghana. In instances offered for donor intervention in the five northern regions, the frameworks for explaining the regions' poverty situations, are mystified in contentious socio-cultural underpinnings. Furthermore, the structural causes of poverty are glorified in the historical, socio-political, and geographical roots of deprivation of the north. This makes the region a host to an array of bilateral, multilateral, country specific donor and (local and international) philanthropic projects. Most often, the NGOs are clamouring for space with stakeholder engagements in the face of ever growing and expanding vulnerabilities. Many NGOs have worked in the savannah regions for the past 40 years and counting, yet the region is still the most deprived in comparison to the south.

The roles and the impressions of the NGOs vary across the length and breadth of the savannah regions. It has invariably reduced government tailored developmental projects for the region with 'undocumented' claims that the NGOs and ultimately donors' aid are complementing government efforts. The marshalled influence of these developmental agencies in aggregation have equally not fostered growth and micro level development of the region. The NGOs operation subtleties have created 'parallel and conflicting power of authority' within the domain of rural community development. Many government officials responsible for much of local government activities look up to 'powerful and resourced' third sector players to seek funding, direction, and mandate for developing their various sectors with ultra-individual benefits. These subterfuges of cooperation often led to institutional wrangling and compromises in field operations. In most cases, where sustainability of developmental projects is handed over to local partners for continuity, there is often poor execution of such projects. And these are generally blamed on inadequate funding for continuity.

The flawed sequencing of donor aid activities in some of the communities frequently led to the destruction of the spirit of holistic development. The usual practice of different donor agencies engaging in different interventions for the same beneficiary group sometimes advances disastrous outcomes. There are equally the diverse and conflicting claims of stakeholders and beneficiaries not cooperating with NGOs for maximum impact of donor aid. With multiple projects interventions within a given community, stakeholders choose and pick donor activities that are implicitly rewarding when implemented at the same time. The efficacy of government (Clemens, 2006; Clementi et al., 2018) of both the donors and recipients, in the monitoring and evaluation of these projects are also lost in the initiation phase of such projects.

Whiles the concept of donor aid could legitimise the authority of community stakeholders to promote growth and development; they give conflicting justification and signal scoundrel cohesion towards funded projects. It is this convergence that create the culture of dependency on aid between the implementers (NGOs) and beneficiaries.

5 | MICRO LEVEL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND BENEFICIARY UPHEAVALS

The strategy for explaining the poverty dynamics of northern Ghana confuses the causes and effect of poverty. It depoliticises contentious issues about the socio-political and structural causes of poverty in the regions. The existence and execution of projects by NGOs (implementors) as alternative to government, is maligned and misconstrued by most beneficiary communities in Ghana's democratic dispensation. Beneficiaries generally believed that donor aid occupies the non-economic (non-profit and non-political (non-government) space between the state and the household.

From the beneficiary community perspective, there exist the "triangular politics of partnership". It begins with a collaboration between the implementors (NGOs) and donor aid on one hand, an alliance of cooperation for development between the implementors and beneficiary communities on another hand, and an act of commitment between donors and beneficiaries. If these

acts of collaboration, cooperation and commitment are harnessed and managed properly, it could provide a better allegiance to intervention and a more qualified outcome to development projects.

The masquerade of cooperation between the donors and implementors for the critical decision-making processes of what intervention to undertake in each community is what Botchway (2001) and Mohan (2002) described as the “fetishism of participation”. It is this relationship among the development agencies that blinkers them away from the structural causes of poverty. Aid beneficiaries believe that implementors and donor agencies in their quest to encourage inclusion in the developmental process, clandestinely advocate practices which deepen poverty at the individual and community levels.

Within this partnership, the stakeholders in the communities usually believe there exist a line of ‘occupational friction’ between patrons of developmental projects and their corresponding implementors. In other words, this is the choice of partnership to forge a relation between donors and NGOs; in effect between interest and growth emphasised by local knowledge. This is often through the processes of power play and participation. The northern beneficiaries believe that donors settle for power play (interest) since they have the financial muscle and decide to a greater degree the policy agendas with their funding while the implementors settle for participation as they usually have local knowledge. Owning the “legitimacy” of entry into the beneficiary space, the NGOs act as gate keepers in reaching the grassroots (Mohan, 2002).

Donors usually seek out reliable and successful implementors with evidence of local knowledge in the development financial marketplace. These indicators of positive outcomes are measured through the NGOs’ collaboration, networking abilities and regional locations. So, to source funding for their NGOs’ operations, resilience, and significance these implementors equally advance their agility and adaptability. With local innovative techniques and multiple competencies in developmental projects workplace, they adopt and adapt to working within different communities.

To beneficiaries’ communities, donors and implementors are the same complementarily, but structurally and strategically different, nonetheless. The bone of contention between them is often the lack of capability and the slow, inflexible ethnologically specific processes of project implementation which NGOs must undertake, coupled with the need to meet international accounting procedures and standards of the aid giver. While this translates into poor monitoring and evaluation assessments, implementors believe donors are too rigid in their demand for accountability in traditionally immeasurable forms. Donors are similarly believed to be overbearing in their demand for the projection of their imagery and that of their home country. This coercion makes the implementors and their grassroots constituents move further away from the decision-making processes of development aid. In effect giving away the power for the choice of intervention for community growth to rest solely on the donor. The donors then concentrate on ideas, networking, education, and the decision-making processes, for what intervention to undertake. The implementors on the other hand concentrate on the time bound, spatially fixed, outreach projects, and their ‘accountability for survival’.

The funding and implementing of priority projects by the donors and NGOs, and not the communities prioritised projects, seldomly creates the culture of aid dependency within these beneficiaries. It is believed that large parts of northern Ghana do not have access to basic social provisions and that, this seems to matter to some western funders sometimes (Krause, 2014). This underscored the relationship some global donors have with perceived poor communities in northern Ghana and the fundraising activities of many NGOs working in the regions. This is the beginning trust of global donors and distant suffering. To initiate a developmental project in any given community, the benefits are first view from the taxpayers of the donor country. The donors often have strategic reasons for undertaking such projects. Their first decision is often for social intervention rather than economic empowerment.

Beneficiaries of aid often believe that social intervention without economic empowerment means the “providers would keep providing”. This is often the case in some communities surveyed in the researched regions. There were many different ‘country branded’ projects, while the communities were still looking for donors for specific interventions. The response from some of the community members is that they were not part of the decision process for “that project”, but they are happy the projects are sited in their communities. What it means for them is that with time their actual intervention would be met. To them, it also means their communities are visible to ‘the outside world’ and donor intervention would come their way.

During the survey for community profiling and mapping, there was four different donor aid branded projects found in some communities at the same time. For instance, in a community close to Tamale, there were 4 different water projects undertaken by different donors. They were the ‘USAID and SEND Ghana water projects’, the ‘NORRIP mechanised borehole and CSR water and sanitation projects’. These projects were all sited in proximity to each other but only one was functioning. When quizzed why the different projects in the community, most of the beneficiaries believed even though water was a needed resource, they preferred a health post. They showed that ‘the water from the projects sites were salty and often dried up during the dry season, while the pond they often shared with farm animals was less salty and available all year-round’ (Field interviews, 2020).

While some of the projects in these communities lack coordination in siting, others lacked financial resources for completion and maintenance. Beneficiaries of aid equally believe that some donors employ expatriates for project information that could be gotten from local artisans within these regions. In some cases, beneficiaries are more experienced than the expatriates in terms of local knowledge for advancement. This they claim results in poor siting of some projects in the communities. Most former NGO workers interviewed were of the view that payments for expatriates were way above the locals even though the local employees were more experienced. They mentioned that most often, inexperienced volunteer cops from the donor countries are brought in to manage some of the projects and are paid and treated well above their local counterparts (Field interviews, 2020).

The scenario where donor funds are advanced to create market for products and personnel of the donor countries typifies the fundamental logic of aid as a growth tool for the so-called developed nations. It also amplifies the means of keeping not just the internal north-south divide in Ghana in place; but also entrenching the external North-South gap between developed and not-so-developed regions of the world. This further goes to justify and engrain the political economy of aid by most beneficiaries. Beyond the technical expertise and consultancies that generate work for the donor countries, nearly all equipment for borehole construction, healthcare instruments and educational materials are sourced from donor countries. Globally, over 60% of aid is classified as tied or conditional aid.

Tied aid tends to be more detrimental to growth in developing countries and the evidence so far points to a micro-level manifestation of the phenomenon in northern Ghana. These regions have had tremendous donor inflows through NGO projects, but with very little actual transformation in the economic and social fortunes of the people. Donor aid has been the conduit through which the developed world hijacked the key livelihood sources of the people of the northern regions. This has indelibly widened the poverty gaps through sometimes inappropriate technology and the introduction of seeds and chemicals to boost harvest. The introduction of these seedlings deviates from the traditional methods of seed preparation for the next planting season, and this further corrupts the local farming processes. Farmers in their quest to remain relevant to the donor aid implementation dynamics go for the donor-sponsored seeds which cannot be used in subsequent farming seasons. The repeated use of chemicals and weedicides that artificially inflate the cost of agriculture for peasant farmers usually introduced as the best alternative (by the many NGOs' projects); reduces their intuitive and indigenous initiative at the expense of new practices. It is the introduction of these inauthentic and artificial organisms that have now been shown to be inimical to the growth prospects of these poor regions. The focus on chemical fertilizers to improve crop yield does not only in the long run impoverish the soil with ramifications for poverty, but very often creates the ever-growing vulnerabilities present in these five northern regions. It is this peculiarity that spins farmers into a poverty cycle and hooks them up to the many NGO projects, which lend both money and ideas as inputs to increase productivity. The reports of suicide due to crop failure, pest invasion and poor harvest occasioned by unnatural agricultural practices in northern Ghana require further nuanced analysis, but nonetheless has correlation to the effect of aid in the environment.

6 | IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

According to Krause (2014: 4) 'NGOs have come to inhabit a shared social space and this shared space produces both assumptions and debates. These expectations and discussions are common across 'governance system of aid administration, and the governed'. It is imperative to realise the rationale within this social space by understanding the practical logic of operation between donors of development aid and their beneficiary communities. The expectation of the beneficiary of aid is the hosted commitment of the donor to reducing poverty. In the achievement of any social intervention initiated by the donor, the ideas and ideals of development intervention, and the practice of it are well ironed out.

The ideas of development intervention with donor funding go through strategic decision-making processes. The decisions are prepared, and the concepts visualised within the organisational framework of the donor agency. The background to operation is mapped out and auctioned on the project market where donors expect collaboration from the third sector players. The implementation and completion through to monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability are the hallmark of the NGOs who are often development experts with diverse professional backgrounds. Their routine and procedures usually figure out the location of the projects.

In the quest to produce a successful project based on the principles of the donor, the chosen beneficiaries become part of the package for the implementing NGOs. The NGOs in turn expect cooperation through participation from beneficiary communities. Thus, the choice of the beneficiary communities is well thought of before stakeholder engagements begin. This research focuses

on the perspective of the beneficiaries in the development aid agenda by contextualising the practice of development assistance through the political economy of aid at the micro level.

There is sometimes the contestation of authority, citizens' power, and ownership of project among the three participants of aid; that is the donor community, the implementors and the beneficiary communities. It is these stakeholders' power struggles that usually affect the success of any projects or intervention in northern Ghana. The chequered layers of development practices witnessed within these vulnerable communities makes most community intervention projects lose the ownership and legitimacy right from the decision-making point. In effect making the responsibility and accountability of projects not to be well defined and accorded. A more critical step is accentuating the role of the northerners in Ghana by making them own the process of development with a strong focus on generating internal capacity and self-belief. With a well-structured development framework, their efforts could subsequently be complemented by a combination of central government support and donor handouts. Given the multidimensionality of poverty in the northern regions, the solutions must be evidently multifaceted. The common belief that beneficiaries are part of the aid package should be reconsidered in the view of this research, and a more quantitative assessment of aid on key development targets in the savannah regions of Ghana could shed further light on this theme in future.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Gloria Kafui Bob-Milliar is a PhD Candidate at the at Wits Business School, University of the Witwatersrand. Her research interest includes development aid at the micro-level, economics, and development finance. She is an academic at the University for Development Studies and an advocate for balanced development across regions and countries.

Imhotep Paul Alagidede is a metaeconomist and a transdisciplinary scholar with avid interest in the noumena behind phenomena. He is an entrepreneur and philanthropist, an accomplished academic, a seasoned consultant and policy maker. His major contribution is on the synthesis of the thesis and the antithesis in all disciplines.

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How to cite this article: Bob-Milliar, K.G ,& Alagidede, P. I (2022), The Political Economy of Donor Aid in Northern Ghana, *Journal of African Political Economy and Development*, 2022;07:25–37.